

## 9 What is the Meaning of Sacrifice?<sup>1</sup>

If one were to ask a Christian about the meaning of sacrifice, it is likely that it would be seen as a way of getting right with God. And in expounding the significance of Christ's death in this connection, the New Testament often speaks in terms of its being a kind of sacrifice, and refers to sacrifice in the First Testament in doing so. Yet the New Testament also uses the imagery of sacrifice in a number of other connections, and (not surprisingly) it thus reflects the fact that sacrifice has broader significance than the one Christians usually assume. I shall consider four approaches to interpreting sacrifice.

### 1 Sacrifice as a Way of Giving a Gift

A man returns home clutching a bunch of cut flowers. He presents these to his wife, who perhaps bursts into tears (or perhaps slaps him in the face). What is going on? In their culture the gift of flowers is recognized as a positive gesture in the context of a relationship. But the gesture may have various significances. It may express or accompany gratefulness for some act, appreciation for the person, hope for some favor, sorrow for some wrongdoing, or regret for some non-culpable failure (he arrived home late because the train broke down). The implicit feelings (for instance, of appreciation or regret) may of course be genuine or false.

Giving a gift is one central aspect of the meaning of sacrifice.<sup>2</sup> As gifts to God, sacrifices can have a parallel range of significances to those of the giving of flowers. A thank-offering expresses gratitude for some act on God's part. A whole offering suggests the commitment of the person to God; the offerer surrenders every part of the animal. Sin offerings and guilt offerings (as they are traditionally called in English) provide ways of finding cleansing when one is taboo, and of making up for the consequences of some offence. Parallel to the gift of flowers in human relationships, then, sacrifices give the appropriate concrete, material, symbolic expression and evidence of a response to God of commitment, appreciation, gratitude, hope, shame, and regret. Without the attitude, the sacrifice would be meaningless; without the sacrifice, the attitude would be a mere head-trip. The analogy with a practice such as the giving of flowers may help Western Christians appreciate some aspects of the logic of sacrifice.

First, the practice presupposes a framework of interpretation within a culture; as with other aspects of Western culture, someone from outside might find it puzzling. The significance of the practice is assumed rather than stated.

Second, Protestant interpreters have understood passages in the Prophets and the Psalms that raise questions about sacrifice to be suggesting that there is no need for sacrifice in principle. One might

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<sup>1</sup> First published as "Old Testament Sacrifice and the Death of Christ" in John Goldingay (ed.), *Atonement Today* (London: SPCK 1995), pp. 3-20.

<sup>2</sup> See George B. Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 1925), pp. 1-20

similarly argue that there is no need for a man to give his wife flowers, especially as this can easily be a substitute for real commitment, or a disguise rather than an expression of feelings, or a sexist gesture. One fault in that argument lies in its failure to take account of the fact that men and women are material human beings and that symbolic gestures are built into being human. It is appropriate for people to have concrete and outward, practical and symbolic, ways of expressing attitudes of will, mind, and feeling. In a parallel way people relate to God by symbolic actions as well as by words, thoughts, and feelings. The analogy with the giving of a gift such as flowers hints at the person-to-person nature of the relationship between God and people. To put it another way, a gift is an act that does something. The giving of flowers can have a magical effect on a relationship; sacrifice, too, can act like magic. Something happens when either offering is made.

Third, it is not merely their inherent commercial value that gives the gift of flowers its significance and its effectiveness, but the gift's symbolic significance in a culture. If the giver had caused his wife some loss (e.g., had crashed her car) he would need to put that right; the gift of flowers adds to this practical act rather than replacing it. On the other hand, if the loss he had caused could not be made up (as when I accidentally threw away a package of photographs of our wedding and honeymoon) some symbolic gift may help to compensate for it (though I do not remember making one). In the Day of Atonement ritual, two goats correspond to the entire body of wrongdoing committed by the community in a year.

Fourth, both forms of gift also presuppose that right attitude of spirit and will is indispensable if the gift is to be significant and effective. The gift only "works" if it is the symbolic expression of a personal attitude that characterizes the giver's life as a whole. A woman whose husband brings her flowers that she has reason to believe hide rather than express his true attitude may well respond "Stuff your bloody flowers." In a parallel way Yahweh says "Stuff your bloody sacrifices" in equivalent circumstances.

Fifth, it is possible for the giving of flowers to be the beginning of a relationship, but more commonly it belongs in the context of an existent one. Sacrifice, too, is not a means of establishing the relationship between people and God but a means of expressing, developing, and healing it.<sup>3</sup>

Sixth, when the man offers his flowers to his wife, as much significance attaches to their reception as to their being offered. In parallel, a "'theology of acceptance' pervades Old Testament attitudes towards sacrifice."<sup>4</sup> This begins with Gen 4. The story of Cain and Abel already illustrates that acceptance cannot be presupposed, that everything depends upon it, and that questions of moral stance and questions of acceptance interweave, though not always in the way we might expect (see further Jer 6:20; Hos 9:4; Amos 5:22).

God offered Jesus Christ as a sacrifice, Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice. What does this statement suggest regarding the significance of his death?

First, the offering of Christ was an outward act. The statement that Jesus' death was a sacrifice is a metaphorical one. Jesus was not literally a

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Derek Kidner, *Sacrifice* (London: Tyndale, 1952), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Daly, *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), p. 23.

priest, his offering did not take place in a temple, and he did not kill himself. Describing his death as a sacrifice is a way of gaining an understanding of its deep significance. It is an example of typological thinking. But as a sacrifice, Jesus' person, his life, and his death – the totality of his self-offering – were concrete, outward, historical, this-worldly events.

Second, the offering of Christ took place within the context of a person-to-person relationship. To see Christ's death as effecting the satisfaction of God's honor or the achievement of God's victory or the redemption of God's possession or the acceptance of God's punishment sets it in the context of intrinsically hierarchical and/or contractual webs of relationships, those of authority, power, business, or law. To see Christ's death as a gift offered to God sets it in the context of a person-to-person relationship of mutual commitment with its potential for love, favor, generosity, self-sacrifice, gratitude, and forgiveness (as opposed to pardon, which is a more hierarchical idea).<sup>5</sup>

Third, this relationship in whose context Christ's offering took place is an already existing one. It is not the case that people were unable to relate to God before Jesus' act of self-offering to the Father. It is precisely because they were in relationship to God that there needed to be an offering of themselves to God in appreciation, gratitude, joy, commitment, hope, penitence, and recompense, expressed in the self-offering that characterizes Christ's life as a whole.

It was because God chose us that God gave Jesus for us, rather than vice versa. Sacrifice was the seal of a relationship rather than the means to it. Because my wife is disabled and cannot get out to the shops on her own, when Christmas draws near I have sometimes said to her "Would you like to give me that shirt?" And if she liked it too, I would buy it, wrap it, attach a tag that says it comes from her to me, put it with the other family presents, and in due course receive it from among them as a gift from her that I knew she was glad to give me.

The same point may be made by noting that Christ is both priest and victim at his sacrifice. He is not given by someone else. When this form of self-sacrifice is required by the path he has to walk, he freely gives himself; it is a positive act of self-giving rather than a hopeless giving up. Indeed, we may go further. It was already the case that Israel's sacrifices involved the offering of something God provided. The point is particularly explicit in the prayer with which Israel brought firstfruits (Deut 26:10-11) and in David's prayer regarding the offerings for building a temple (1 Chr 29:14). God is the origin of Christ's sacrifice in a more direct or specific sense. Such sacrificial notions are implied when the New Testament says that God "gave his only Son" (John 3:16) or "put [Christ] forward as a sacrifice of atonement" (Rom 3:25) or "did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us" (Rom 8:32, following the language of Abraham's offering of Isaac).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Vincent Brümmer, "Atonement and Reconciliation," *Religious Studies* 28 (1992): 438-52, for further analysis.

<sup>6</sup> See Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1988/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 125; James D. G. Dunn, "Paul's Understanding of the Death of Jesus as a Sacrifice," in Stephen W. Sykes (ed.), *Sacrifice and Redemption* (Cambridge/New York: CUP, 1991), pp. 35-56 (p. 41).

## 2 Sacrifice as a Way of Finding Cleansing and Restoration

The giving of flowers, then, can have various meanings. These are not confined to the expression of sorrow for some failure, but they do include that. Likewise some sacrifices expressed God people's commitment, gratitude, appreciation, or need. Others were more concerned with the problems caused by human wrongdoing. Indeed, the account of Israel's sacrificial system in Leviticus does hint at a general concern to allow for the fact of human failure (1:4). It may suggest the idea that even in expressing our commitment, gratitude, appreciation, and prayer, we do so as people sharing in this failure.

In Richard Swinburne's analysis,<sup>7</sup> in human relationships doing wrong to someone has two sorts of moral consequences. It puts us in a situation in relation to them something like that of a debtor: there is a wrong that needs righting. In addition we acquire a status "something like being unclean."

Leviticus 4 – 5 presupposes an equivalent dynamic in our relationship with God, and provides for two corresponding forms of offering. They have traditionally been called "sin offering" and "guilt offering", but "purification offering" and "restitution offering" are better renderings of the words.<sup>8</sup> The first deals with the stain or taboo that some acts bring on a person or a place, the second with the position of indebtedness it puts the person in. They apply whether or not the event involved moral blame (that is, they deal with events that were objectively wrong whether or not the person was culpable), and they offer ways of finding cleansing and of making up for the wrong in certain respects. It is the restitution offering with which the servant's death is metaphorically identified in Isa 53:10. Here sacrifice is already spoken of typologically within the First Testament. Misunderstanding of Isa 53:5-6 and 10-12 as if it implied a punitive understanding of sacrifice is one root of the idea that there is a link between atonement and punishment.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Isa 53 (misunderstood) and Hebrews form the restrictive prism that has dominated Christian thinking about the atonement.

The notion that wrongdoing leaves us in debt or under obligation to the person we have wronged is a familiar one, and the giving of flowers as a recognized expression of contrition and of the desire to "make up for" what we have done illumines some aspects of the logic of sacrifices concerned with sin. Swinburne's analysis and the comparison with the Levitical offerings draws attention to another aspect of the problem caused by our failure and wrongdoing, the stain it leaves. Contact with blood and with death was a major cause of stain or taboo as well as indebtedness in Israel. It parallels our own sense of stain as well as indebtedness when we are in contact with blood or death or are (even unwittingly) the cause of injury or death.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 1989), p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 88-89, following, e.g., Jacob Milgrom, "Sin-offering or Purification-offering," *VT* 21 (1971): 237-39, and Baruch A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), pp. 101-5.

<sup>9</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes* II.16.5-6; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 (Edinburgh: Clark, 1956), p. 253.

It is not that we first experience failure and then consciously utilize the imagery of pollution to express its significance. If a child escaped its mother's grasp and ran into the road, and I could not avoid running it over, I would instinctively feel stained by its blood. I would find myself distasteful. I would be guilty of killing someone, even though it was not my fault, and I would feel the shame of guilt. This would be the case all the more, of course, if I were slightly exceeding the speed limit at the time, as is likely, for then I have to accept more responsibility for the event; but even without that, guilt, stain, and shame are involved.<sup>11</sup> If a wife discovers her husband has been unfaithful to her, among other things he may well seem stained to her. Even if he takes an initiative in confessing the wrongdoing and seeks a new beginning to the relationship, he may well nevertheless seem stained both to her and to himself, and she may find it difficult to approach him. In neither case are we speaking of a mere subjective feeling of stain. And in either case, the mere giving of flowers would have no effect. How does the stain come to be removed?

If I am morally in the wrong and am stained, restoration and cleansing may involve at least five factors.<sup>12</sup> There is repentance, in the two Hebrew senses of regret and turning to a new pattern of behavior, and also in the Greek sense of a change of attitude. There is the open expression of that repentance in acknowledgment of the wrongdoing as what it was, in confession or apology. There may be some symbolic act of which the gift of flowers is a trivial example. There needs to be some substantial act that replaces my wrongdoing with something positive. Where possible this involves at least the restoring of the situation to what it was before (if I have crashed your car, I see it is repaired). Of course in the situations that trouble us most (such as death or unfaithfulness) that is impossible, and some other more imaginative act may be required. Finally, there is time, for somehow restoration cannot be instant.

A similar set of factors may be identified in relationships between human beings and God. Deliberate wrongdoing in defiance of God's word should issue in being cut off from the community, and sacrifice alone cannot make up for such wrongdoing (Num 15:30-31). If a person repents of their wrongdoing and confesses, they cease to be in defiance of God, but this does not solve the entire problem, and they must also make restitution for their wrongdoing, in relation to human beings who were involved and in relation to God. They also have to take the appropriate action with regard to the defilement that their action has brought upon them; in itself their repentance and confession cannot remove that, but it perhaps puts them into a position like that of an inadvertent offender who can offer the customary sacrifice in connection with their offence and thereby find purification (Lev 6:1-7).<sup>13</sup> With offerings for purification, too, time is one of the great healers: "purification is achieved principally by an appropriate

<sup>10</sup> Cf. George B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), p. 17; Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (reprinted Boston: Beacon, 1969), p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>12</sup> I partly follow the analysis in Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, pp. 81-84.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jacob Milgrom, "The Priestly Doctrine of Repentance," *RB* 82 (1975): 186-205.

ritual and a lapse of time.”<sup>14</sup> And if the offering is not set in the context of the right attitude, to judge from the prophets Yahweh may indeed say, “Stuff your blood sacrifices.”

Directly or indirectly a giver is personally identified with their gift. Usually the husband personally hands over the flowers; commonly the offerer lays hands on the offering. Like flowers, offerings do not generally substitute for people (except in the case of the dedication of the firstborn) but neither do their offerers merely own them. The laying on of hands identifies offerers and offerings and indicates that they truly represent them; something of themselves passes over with the gift to the recipient.<sup>15</sup> In the case of a purification offering and of the Day of Atonement ritual, the stain is transferred to the offering (cf. Lev 16:21) and is destroyed in it. Here there is indeed a sense in which the offering substitutes for the offerer, though it is not that the offering is vicariously punished. The idea of punishment belongs in the framework of law rather than the framework of worship, and we get into difficulties when we mix ideas from the different frameworks such as these. Sacrifice does not involve *penal* substitution in the sense that one entity bears another’s punishment. By laying hands on the offering, the offerers identify with it and pass on to it not their guilt but their stain. The offering is then not vicariously punished but vicariously cleansed.

A common illustration of the need and achievement of atonement pictures God and humanity on either side of a chasm carved out by human sinfulness; the cross then makes it possible for the chasm to be bridged and for human beings to be one with God. The sacrificial model presupposes that God and human beings stand together in love and mutual self-offering. Insofar as sin becomes a problem in the relationship, in the sacrificial system God provides the way for it to be handled (even while drawing attention to it) as part of providing the means in general for expressing and developing a relationship with people. Our situation is not one in which God and ourselves are set over against each other with sin causing a gulf between us, but one in which God is on the same side as us over against all that spoils and offends. “Whereas our rebellions are too mighty for us, you are the one who expiates them” (Ps 65:3). In Leviticus it is our job to expiate our wrongdoing, by following the procedure God has laid out; the psalm sees God as doing that. Of course people could decline to turn back to God, to seek forgiveness, and to offer the appropriate sacrifice, and then the relationship would remain disturbed. There would be tension between them and God. If we thus resist God, we do not stand together on the same side over against sin.

In Christ, as happens in connection with a purification offering or the Day of Atonement ritual, God is willing to transfer to something else the stain that rests on human beings so as then to destroy it and render the people clean. A sinless one is “made sin”, or perhaps “made a sin offering” (2 Cor 5:21).<sup>16</sup> What was polluted can be restored through contact with the clean, as is announced by Jesus’ unhesitating willingness to reach out to

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<sup>14</sup> Philip P. Jenson, *Graded Holiness* (JSOTSup 106; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), p. 165.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Dunn, “Paul’s Understanding of the Death of Jesus as a Sacrifice,” pp. 44-45.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (London: DLT, 1961), p. 420.

touch the polluted. They are no danger to him; he brings cleansing and restoration to them.<sup>17</sup>

Christ offers himself on our behalf; his self-offering becomes effective for us as we associate ourselves with it. It would be natural for the woman whose child I killed to feel negative towards me and for me to share that feeling towards myself. Imagine that God brought the child back to life and gave it to me to restore to its mother. As I did so, my stain would surely go, and this would be recognized by her and by me. Indeed, the relationship between us might now gain a depth it would never otherwise have had (though all this only if God brought me into the process of restoring).

### 3 Sacrifice as a Way of Enabling Movement between This World and the Realm of the Holy

Sacrifice, then, is a way of making a gift and a way of bringing about restoration. But it commonly involves the gift's destruction, a strange way of making a gift. Why is this so?

As with the giving of cut flowers (which also die as a result of becoming a gift), one can suggest a down-to-earth reason. There is a substantial overlap between sacrifice and feasting, and an animal has to be killed before it can be eaten. Generally the killing of the animal was a preliminary to the rite at the altar, undertaken by the offerer rather than by a priest. In the First Testament, at least, it is not the case that the animal's death is the climax of the rite.<sup>18</sup> What is central is what is done with its blood and with fire.

The varied acts involving blood indeed emphasize that sacrifice is about life poured out in death. Perhaps this reflects a distinctive feature of this occasion of giving. The gift is given to someone invisible, someone who belongs in a realm other than the earthly, the one who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy. There is a metaphysical distinction between the offerers and the recipient (even apart from any moral distinction). To describe God as the holy one is to acknowledge this distinction: God is spirit, humanity is flesh. If sacrifice is to be a means of expressing their mutual relation and of facilitating the step of faith into the unseen world of spirit, it has to belong to both realms.<sup>19</sup> Fire takes the offering from the material, earthly realm to the immaterial, heavenly one.<sup>20</sup> It crosses the threshold between the visible and the invisible.

In Eden God takes the initiative in providing a sacramental means whereby the divine life is shared with human beings through their eating the fruit of a certain tree. This illustrates how it is appropriate for there to be ways of mediating between the realm of the holy and the created realm even before sin is a problem. East of Eden human beings follow God's example and offer God of their produce and their flocks. The mutual giving of fruit,

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<sup>17</sup> Daly, *The Origins of The Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>18</sup> Contrast J. H. M. Beattie, "On Understanding Sacrifice," in M. F. C. Bourdillon and Meyer Fortes (ed.), *Sacrifice* (London: New York: Academic, 1980), pp. 29-44 (p. 34).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Godfrey Ashby, *Sacrifice* (London: SCM, 1988), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice* (Chicago: University of Chicago/London: Cohen and West, 1964), p. 97.

produce, and flocks is designed to express the relationship between God and humanity, to facilitate movement between people and God, again independently of questions about sin. (In practice it can actually contribute to the process whereby the metaphysical distinction is turned into a moral one as it tempts the human beings into misplaced assertiveness and aggression.)

Sacrifice facilitates movement between different worlds. It is a ferry-boat between heaven and earth.<sup>21</sup> Sacrifice is a "*rite de passage*"<sup>22</sup> (a ferry-boat is a *bateau de passage*). The imagery was extensively used in the twentieth century, but it already appears in Luther's comments on Heb 10:19-22, where Christ is the ferryman who transports us safely from this realm to that of heaven.<sup>23</sup>

Sacrifice can also be part of a *rite de passage* in another sense, in that it can facilitate movement at moments of transition in the life of individuals or communities.<sup>24</sup> There is thus a sacrifice associated with birth and with the rite of circumcision. It is striking, however, that there are no such sacrifices associated with other transition events such as puberty, marriage, and death, nor is it the case that the regular Israelite sacrifices belonged in this context. Again, the Day of Atonement takes place in September-October in proximity to the New Year and thus facilitates the transition from one year to the next as God's means of ensuring that one year's failures are eliminated as a new year begins. But it is also striking that Lev 16 and 23, far from making anything of this point, date the Day of Atonement, like other festivals, not by the autumn calendar but by the spring calendar, in which it comes in the seventh month.<sup>25</sup>

Exodus 12 similarly begins by asserting that Passover comes at the beginning of the year, implying that if the Israelite calendar year has a transition point, this occurs in the spring, with Passover as its transition ritual.<sup>26</sup> Passover marks the shift from the old year to the new, symbolized by the clearing out of the old leaven in favor of the new. It also marks the transition from the rainy season/winter to the dry season/summer. Further, and more importantly in the First Testament's explicit commentary, it commemorates the Israelites' passing from bondage to freedom, from Egypt to Canaan, and from death to life. The rite takes place chronologically at the transition point from one day to another, at midnight, and geographically emphasizes the transition point from inside to outside, the door of people's houses where the blood is daubed. Historically and then experientially these transitions are facilitated by means of sacrifice.

<sup>21</sup> See Ashby, *Sacrifice*, pp. 24-25, quoting Sylvain Lévi, *La doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brâhmanas* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> See A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge/Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Christopher Cocksworth, "The Cross, Our Worship and Our Living," in *Atonement Today*, pp. 111-27.

<sup>24</sup> See Edmund R. Leach, "The Logic of Sacrifice," in Bernard Lang (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament* (London: SPCK/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 136-50.

<sup>25</sup> See John W. Rogerson, "Sacrifice in the Old Testament," in Bourdillon and M. Fortes (ed.), *Sacrifice*, pp. 45-59, for further critique.

<sup>26</sup> So J. B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover from the Earliest Times to A.D. 70* (London/New York: OUP, 1963), pp. 186-87.



Christ relates to us not merely by taking our place in a legal or cultic transaction between humanity and God but by being our “representative or mediator who in his very person presents or mediates God to us and us to God, thus showing the vital differences between the creator and the creation not to be a lethal separation: in and through him we, though mortal beings, live in the eternal community with the immortal God.”<sup>27</sup> He “is our substitute because he does for us what we cannot do for ourselves,” because we need to have our being formed not by ourselves but by God, but he substitutes for us in order to free us then to be ourselves and to go where he has gone, into God’s presence.<sup>28</sup> His death makes possible our movement into God’s presence.

In theory the dying of Christ thus fulfils and terminates any need for special places, rites, castes, or times. In Christian faith there is no longer sanctuary, sacrifice, priesthood, or sabbath, because there is now open access to God for all time, people, and places.

In practice, the Christian church found itself reinventing holy place: churches became the house of God (commonly following the threefold architectural structure of the Jerusalem temple) and not merely convenient places for the temple of God to meet. It reinvented holy time, Sunday as the sabbath and not simply resurrection day. It reinvented holy caste, a structured patriarchy of bishop, priests, and deacons corresponding to that of high priest, priests, and Levites, rather than the more egalitarian male and female apostles, prophets, teachers, and leadership groups of the New Testament. It reinvented holy rites: baptism in the street and eucharist in the home become holy baptism and holy communion.

Is it the same instinct that underlies the notion of eucharistic sacrifice? If we accept the notions of Christian sabbath, priesthood, and church buildings, do we also have to accept that there needs to be some continuing outlet for the God-approved instinct that led to the institution of sacrifice? Or is sacrament enough? Passages such as Rom 12, Rom 16, and 1 Peter 1 imply that there is indeed a continuing expression of the sacrificial death of Christ, but it is one made in the world rather than in the church building. Sacrifices are offered in service, proclamation and winning people for Christ. If this is so, is there a place in Christian faith for holy place, holy time, or holy caste? I think not. But then, God has to put up with what we cannot do without.

## 4 Sacrifice as a Way of Handling the Violence in the Community

Humanity’s first sacrifice leads to humanity’s first act of violence, the act that Genesis itself describes as the occasion of a “fall” and of the first “sin” (Gen 4:5-7). The essence of sin East of Eden seems to lie in violence; it is for the pursuit of violence that Lamech adapts the first technology, and for the glorification of violence that he adapts the first art (Gen 4:23-24). It is because the world is filled with violence that God determines to destroy it

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<sup>27</sup> Ingolf U. Dalferth, “Christ Died for Us,” in *Sacrifice and Redemption*, pp. 299-325 (p. 321).

<sup>28</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, pp. 165-66.

(Gen 6:11-13). The First Testament's hope is of an era of peace when everyone is free to sit under their own vine and fig tree.

Animal and human sacrifice by their very nature involve violence, on an object that did not "deserve" it. The substitutionary aspect to sacrifice is clearest in the Day of Atonement ritual, where one goat is sacrificed and another "scapegoat" is driven into the open country. The rite is an act of catharsis.<sup>29</sup> The link between sacrifice and violence is also hinted at by the Passover festival, which in Israel's own history with God begins with a reversal of the violence of Egypt.

In *Violence and the Sacred* René Girard has made the link with violence the key to understanding sacrifice. Even less than other understandings is this overt in the First Testament (in that respect it is reminiscent of Freudian or Marxist understandings of aspects of scripture), but it is a suggestive thesis. Violence has the same contagion as pollution. It has the power to spread its contamination. It is infectious. The only power that can counter violence is more violence, but then "whether we fail or succeed in our effort to subdue it, the real victor is always violence itself.... The more men strive to curb their violent impulses, the more these impulses seem to prosper. The very weapons used to combat violence are turned against their users. Violence is like a raging fire that feeds on the very objects intended to smother its flames."<sup>30</sup>

Blood speaks of violence and taboo. This may be one reason why even menstrual blood causes taboo and requires a purification sacrifice, though this perhaps also hints at a deeper link between sex and violence, hinted at further in a book such as Judges that interrelates the two so systematically.<sup>31</sup> Our own culture has become newly aware of the link between sex and violence within marriage and outside it. "Sexuality leads to quarrels, jealous rages, mortal combats. It is a permanent source of disorder even within the most harmonious of communities."<sup>32</sup> It is said that rapists are often motivated by a desire to defile and pollute their victims.<sup>33</sup> The nature of the manifold links between blood, sexuality, and violence gives gloomy plausibility to "the proposition that all masculine relationships are based on reciprocal acts of violence"<sup>34</sup> which is disturbingly paralleled by the feminist proposition that violence is a distinctively male problem, the converse of the characteristic female need to emerge from passivity.

Sacrifice channels violence, gives it a legitimated context for ritual expression, and thereby exercises a measure of control over its effects in the community. Sacrifice is thus a means of maintaining order in the community.<sup>35</sup> Sacrifice and violence are therefore alternatives. A

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Beattie, "On Understanding Sacrifice," p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins, 1977), p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> See Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymetry* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1988); cf. further Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, e.g., pp. 28, 36 on the link between them in the symbolism of pollution.

<sup>32</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> So Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, p. 119.

<sup>34</sup> *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 48.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Douglas J. Davies, "An Interpretation of Sacrifice in Leviticus," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament*, pp. 151-62, from an anthropological perspective.

community given to violence gives acted testimony to the inefficacy of its sacrifices, as is reflected in the famous contempt for people's sacrifices shown by prophets such as Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah in the midst of communities characterized by violence.<sup>36</sup>

Jesus' death was not actually effected in a ritual context but in a political one. He was killed by soldiers, not priests. The Torah of course had no place for the sacrifice of a human being.<sup>37</sup> And Jesus was killed as a result of a judicial process: his death was indeed punitive or penal, but to satisfy human rather than divine justice. Whereas sacrificial animals were not killed particularly "violently" (Girard's interpretation looks beneath the surface of what is going on symbolically), Jesus' sacrificial death was a more intrinsically violent event.

Admittedly there are commonly ritual features about an execution, particularly when the charge has a religious aspect, as was the case with Jesus.<sup>38</sup> Jesus' death was a political event, but at the same time a religious one because of the interweaving of religion and politics. To say that the people who brought it about were Jews can imply that Jews rather than gentiles bear responsibility for it, and this can encourage and has encouraged anti-semitism. To guard against that, it is now common to emphasize that Romans rather than Jews were responsible for Jesus' death. Historically this is a half-truth; Jewish and Roman leadership surely collaborated in the event, and the New Testament attributes responsibility to both parties. Further, there were both Jews and Romans who tried to avoid Jesus being killed; that in itself suggests that responsibility does not lie with a particular national group as such. Theologically the significant point is not nationality but status. Jesus' death was a religio-political event. It was the desire of the members of his own religious group, but in particular of their leadership, who were able to enter into alliance with the political leadership of the imperial power.

Jesus did not simply die. He was killed. Now sacrifice intrinsically involved bloodshed and death, but not suffering or cruelty. Jesus' death was a deliberately violent, unpleasant event. His killing was an act of violence against him, but not merely for his own sake. He represented God. Whether people recognized it or not, their violence against Jesus was violence against God. "At the cross our human righteousness and piety found themselves ranged in murderous enmity against the God whom they proposed to honor".<sup>39</sup> Certain religious who exhibit "passionist" manifestations present themselves as a sacrifice to the destructive impulse in the world rather than "hitting back";<sup>40</sup> Ann Loades instances Simone Weil.<sup>41</sup> God's own reaction to the violence of the world was to reckon that the power of evil needs to be neutralized and brought to nothing by being absorbed; hence the significance of Jesus' not defending himself when attacked. Forgiveness is

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<sup>36</sup> So Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, p. 122.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. M. F. C. Bourdillon in Bourdillon and Fortes (ed.), *Sacrifice*, pp. 13-14, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978/London: SPCK, 1979), p. 200.

<sup>40</sup> M. Masterman, "The Psychology of Levels of Will," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* n.s. 48 (1947-48): 75-110H (p. 88).

<sup>41</sup> "Eucharistic Sacrifice," in *Sacrifice and Redemption*, pp. 247-61 (pp. 247-48).

“a certain way of absorbing pain”, one that refuses to let it engender bitterness, resentment, hatred, and revenge.<sup>42</sup> God “comes into the world as the ‘Innocent Victim’” and “defends and frees victims.”<sup>43</sup> In the end the death of the victim had to be a death of this kind of victim and not merely a ritual one. In the end Israelite sacrifices were indeed but types of the real thing.

According to Hosea God desires commitment not sacrifice, and according to Matthew Jesus concurs (Hos 6:6; Matt 12:7). Elsewhere Jesus makes the comments that, Mark observes, abolish the categories of cleanliness and pollution (Mark 7:19). Why, then, does God offer and accept the sacrifice of Jesus, or accept an interpretation of his death along such lines? Perhaps God is again characteristically condescending to where humanity is: we desire sacrifice, so God gives it, as was the case with the gift of the temple and the institution of the monarchy in Israel. “We strain to glimpse your mercy seat and find you kneeling at our feet.”<sup>44</sup>

It is tempting to believe that we live in a time of unprecedented human violence. This includes the political violence of two inter-continental wars, of Vietnam and the Balkans, of Ireland and the Middle East, and of oppression within the USSR and China and within Latin American and African states. The killing of human beings as a ritual sacrifice was an unusual event in the ancient world; the killing of human beings as a metaphorical sacrifice has become a more common phenomenon in the national warfare of the modern world. The violence of our time also includes inter-personal violence, in particular marital violence, sexual violence, and parental violence, but also violence in connection with theft, and police violence.

The fact that we belong to such a violent humanity must give great significance for us to the fact that the First Testament understanding of human life gives a prominent place to national and inter-personal violence. Its spirituality is a spirituality of violence, one whose prayer often focuses on violence received and seeks for God to reverse it. In talking about the Psalms, I often find people offended at their violence, but I then suspect that this reflects their not having come to terms with the violence in their own spirits. The real problem lies not in the presence of violence and anger in the Psalms but in their presence within and among us, so that the Psalter is attuned to what goes on among us: there is “an acute correspondence between what is written there and what is practiced here.”<sup>45</sup> The Torah and the Psalms offered people the opportunity to face their violence and anger and to express it in ritual and in words rather than in ordinary actions. The cross is also God’s affirmative response to the Psalms’ prayer for violence.

If ours is a time of unprecedented violence, might it be no coincidence that it is also an unprecedentedly post-Christian time? “When the religious

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<sup>42</sup> Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of Atonement* (London: Nisbet/New York: Scribner’s, 1951), pp. 63-64.

<sup>43</sup> James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Brian Wren, from the hymn “Lord God, your love has called us here,” in *Faith Looking Forward* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 1983).

<sup>45</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: St Mary’s Press, 1982), p. 68.

framework of a society starts to totter, it is not exclusively or immediately the physical security of the society that is threatened; rather the whole cultural foundation of the society is put in jeopardy. The institutions lose their vitality; the protective facade of the society gives way; social values are rapidly eroded, and the whole cultural structure seems on the verge of collapse. The hidden violence of the sacrificial crisis eventually succeeds in destroying distinctions, and this destruction in turn fuels the renewed violence. In short, it seems that anything that adversely affects the institution of sacrifice will ultimately pose a threat to the very basis of the community, to the principles on which its social harmony and equilibrium depend."<sup>46</sup> Might the preaching of the cross as God's once-and-for-all absorbing of human violence be the key to the peace of the world? But does that preaching first have to be heard by the Christian community (that locus of violence), so that it may then be preached in its life?

People in Christian ministry are often on the receiving end of anger and violence, much of it transferred from the appropriate object.<sup>47</sup> The first temptation for them, as for anyone else, is to retaliate. The second temptation is by superhuman effort to absorb and neutralize the violence and thereby end the cycle of violence. It is a temptation, because the mere effort to imitate Jesus, at this point as at others, is ultimately bound to fail. There needs to be an intimate interrelation between this imitation and Jesus' own atoning death that enables us to pass on the violence and anger to Jesus on the basis of his actually having already absorbed it, rather than keeping it within ourselves where it can continue its negative work.

## 5 Sacrifice as an Image for Today

According to a common understanding noted above, human beings are on one side of a chasm and God is on the other side. The chasm is caused by human sin. Alongside that is the implication that God relates to humanity chiefly as a judge, with justice and judges understood in a Western sense: the key point about justice is treating everyone the same and a judge's key role is to safeguard standards of justice. God therefore cannot relate to us because of our legal guilt, which makes it necessary for us to be punished. In terms of the picture, human beings cannot cross the chasm except by means of Christ as bridge. This works within the legal image because he bears the legal punishment for sin, thereby making it possible for God the judge to relate to us.

From a First Testament perspective, this looks unscriptural as well as unlikely to aid the proper preaching of the gospel. Both issue from the way it emphasizes the image of God as lawgiver and judge. Although God is indeed both of those, the First Testament does not draw the same inferences from the fact. As lawgiver, God is entirely free to pardon people if they repent. And as judge, God is committed to taking the side of people in the context of relationship, even when they are in the wrong. This understanding emphasizes a more relational understanding of God than the Christian one. Thus Jewish theologians contrast faith within Judaism, which

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<sup>46</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 49.

<sup>47</sup> I owe this point and the seed thought of what follows to my former colleague Colin Hart.

is a matter of a relationship of trust, and faith within Christianity, which is a matter of believing correct doctrine.

Although Christians link sacrifice and atonement with law and punishment, as if an animal (or a person) that is sacrificed is being punished in someone else's place, the First Testament does not link sacrifice with legal categories. And although a price has to be paid before someone is forgiven, this need not be understood in a legal way. A more relational understanding of God fits scripture better and seems more likely to bring the gospel home to people who think more relationally. In Christian doctrine, it fits Irenaeus's understanding of God the Father as one who faces us holding out two arms, Christ and the Spirit, to embrace us. This is different from the picture of the angry Father placated by the nice Jesus

The First Testament has a number of relational pictures of God, as friend of Abraham, as husband of Jerusalem, as next-of-kin (restorer/redeemer – *go'el*) of a needy relative, as mother/father in relation to son/daughter. Those relational First Testament images may help us understand what Christ achieved on the cross.

a) In 1969, Eric Clapton fell in love with the wife of his best friend, George Harrison, wrote about her the song *Layla*, “the most tortured rock song about unrequited love” (Paul Gambaccini), and eventually stole her from Harrison. Whereas one would have expected Harrison at very least never to want to talk to Clapton again, they actually stayed as friends. That implies that Harrison absorbed within himself the pain of what Clapton did and the anger it surely aroused. Their friendship could therefore survive the wrong. (I do not know whether this is actually what Harrison did; but the story nevertheless illustrates the point.)

b) Imagine a professor coming home after a faculty meeting. It has reinforced her feelings of being powerless, underpaid, undervalued, and put down. She thus acts “crabby” in relation to her husband, who has been cooking the dinner and looking forward to enjoying a glass of wine with her. She complains that the curry is too hot and the wine isn't properly chilled. He has two choices. He can respond in kind, “I've been here slaving over your dinner and all you do is complain.” Or he can lean into the wind and absorb the bitterness that he did not earn. He can wait till it is used up, and thus look for the moment when they can relate to each other because it is gone.

c) The year I went to university, my sister married a man who my parents thought was no good. Six years later he abandoned her just after their first baby was born. Our parents had enjoyed the opportunity to begin a new life after their children had left home, but they welcomed her and her baby back home. Without a murmur they reshaped their life again so that my sister could go to work while my mother looked after the baby, and they helped her gradually to get back to independence as a single parent. They acted as parents and next-of-kin to her, paying the price to redeem/restore her.

d) The Hebrew word most commonly translated “forgive” is a word whose ordinary meaning is “carry.”<sup>48</sup> This is a fair description of what parents do for their children's wrongdoing and it is what God was doing with Israel through First Testament times. It was a process that came to its

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<sup>48</sup> See further chapter 2 above.

climax with the cross, which is the logical end to the First Testament story. Thus, seeing the way the relationship between God and Israel worked helps us see why the cross was necessary. Through God's life with Israel God was paying the price for that relationship, making the sacrifices to keep it going. God's people keep doing their worst to God, so eventually God paid the ultimately price for them. God showed that even killing God cannot put God off from relating to them. God will just come back from the dead.

That is the nature of sacrifice and the nature of what Christ did for us in making atonement.